



Boston mobile app shrinks the distance between city and citizen

- By Patrick Marshall
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Power to the people! That's what Boston's pioneering Citizen Connect programs delivers to residents the power to report problems and to check on fixes from an Android or iPhone smart phone.

In late 2009, the city had invested heavily to upgrade its 24-hour call center system, the work order management system. Part of the effort involved figuring out how the city was using data to improve service delivery to the citizens of Boston.

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"We were doing our best to get these calls answered and to get people feedback as to how the issues were resolved," said Nigel Jacob, co-chairman of the mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics. "We were basically in a big room and we were asking, 'What more can we be doing to enable people to communicate stuff in a way that is also possibly fun?' So the idea of a mobile application came pretty fast."

Using the downloadable Citizen Connect application, residents can submit requests including photographs to the city to fix problems such as potholes and vandalized property. And thanks to the smart phones' GPS, Jacob said, the photograph "automatically answers one question: Where is the problem?"

In less than a minute, the application drops the work request into the to-do list of the appropriate city employee. The user will receive a text message when the work is complete and, in the meantime, can check a built-in map that displays the status of his or her work request. What's more, users can share their reports with other users and even tweet them from within the application.

"The real goal of the app is to be where people are as they are moving through the city, and to partner with the city at the point of viewing whatever the issue is," Jacob said. "It was really important to us to shrink the distance between the citizen and the city worker. So as soon as you took the photograph of the pothole it would end up in the queue of the right city work team. That required not only development of an app but integration with an existing work order management system."

Clearing the hurdles

The development team faced three major challenges in designing and deploying Citizen Connect: tight budgets, staff acceptance and citizen adoption.

According to Chris Osgood, the other co-chair of the Office of New Urban Mechanics, the team was able to field Version 1.0 of CitizenConnect with an investment of only \$25,000. That was thanks largely to the team using its contacts at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab to find an outside developer willing to do the programming for free. (The developer is, in turn, shopping the application to other cities.)

The team also decided to limit initial deployment. "Given fiscal constraints, we don't have the ability to support every possible platform, so our thought was that what we'll do is focus on one or two platforms that will enable us to set a high bar for what the app could do, and get people using it and build credibility," Jacob said. "Then we'll open up the back-end API to allow anybody to build an app."

The team did have concerns about whether workers would accept the application. "There were some risks," Jacob said. "Would the work crews respond to this? There were any number of potential hiccups. In Version 2.0, we moved from a version in which you, as a submitter, could only see your own service requests on a map to a system in which everyone could see everybody's. There was some concern about that."

Thanks to briefings and willingness by work crews to try the system, however, it has been a success and there are calls for expansion. "Since the launch of Citizen Connect we've had departments who now want a version for themselves," Osgood said. "We developed a 1.0 version of something we call City Worker, which is in the hands of all the arborists in the city. It helps them more expeditiously go through inspections. We'll also be rolling something out for the courts department shortly."

The application has also met with approval from residents. "In October of 2009, we were launching something that there was nothing else like," Jacob said. "So there was this question of whether government could actually deliver a mobile app that people could really use. Today, 14 percent of the requests that come in to City Hall come in through this mobile app. So that has been overwhelmingly answered in the positive."

In fact, since its launch nearly 12,000 people have downloaded Citizen Connect, and it has been accessed more than 50,000 times.

Jacob adds that while part of the application's popularity is thanks to the usability of the interface design, much of the credit should also go to city staff members who actually follow through with the requested repairs. "Folks will use an app once because it looks nice, but what brings them back is that pothole actually getting filled or that street light getting fixed," he said. "So a huge amount of the focus of this app is actually following through on those things in the conversation after the initial submission."

Next steps

The popularity of Citizen Connect has the team looking to expand in a variety of directions. For starters, Jacob said, "it now sets us up for an interesting scenario in which we've got tools in the hands of both the public and city personnel. What we will likely be doing in Citizen Connect 4.0, early next year, is to connect Citizen Connect to City Worker."

As the various applications merge, Jacob said, "we'll enable partnering folks at the community level and city personnel who are trying to fix their issues."

Osgood agrees. "It is personalizing government through the use of technology," he said.

And although there are no detailed estimates of the return on the investment in Citizen Connect, Osgood said, "we believe that if you address physical disorder quickly there will be less disorder in the future. It gives people a sense of neighborhood pride. We don't have dollar figures, but we believe that a more engaged citizenry builds a better city."

About the Author

Patrick Marshall is a freelance technology writer for GCN.

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